

The Contradiction of Certainty and Uncertainty in Hedging and Its Implications to Language Teaching

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Abstract

Hedging offers a contradiction in a way that it was “uncertain” words or phrases which in fact show certainty or accuracy. Second language learners need to learn to hedge appropriately in the second language in order not to sound rude or blunt.

Keywords: *hedging, hedges, a hedged statement, intensifier, qualifier, softener, politeness strategy, assertion, cooperative devices in conversation.*

Introduction

To some people the term “hedging” is not as popular as greeting, thanking, or leave-taking. This does not mean they hedge less often than they greet, thank or apologies. In fact, people hedge very frequently in their ordinary, everyday talk. Hedging can also be found in newspapers, magazines, books, even science textbooks and research reports, which many people think these should give exact and accurate information.

There seems to be a negative perception about hedging among language users because it shows uncertainty that is perceived as indicator of unreliability. On the other hand, second or foreign language speakers very often sound too blunt or too direct in the ears of native speakers. It might not be because they are rude or have simple understanding of this world, but it is probably because they do not hedge.

In most cases, hedged statements will very often be more appropriate and accurate than those which are not hedged. This paper will introduce and familiarise the hedging system in English, the types of hedging, the functions of hedging, the users of hedging, and the implication to English teaching in Indonesia.

Hedging

In simple words, hedging means the way people express their uncertainty about something or state something uncertain, and “hedges” are words or phrase which carry the speaker’s uncertainty (Bonano, 1982, p. 36). One reason that speakers do not show certainty of what they say is that they want to indicate only the criteria or type of criteria they find important at that time (Schmidt, 1974, p. 622).

In more technical definitions, hedges are particles, words, or phrases that modify “the degree of membership of a predicate or noun phrase in a set” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 145). This membership shows that “it is *partial*, or true only in certain respects, or that it is *more* true and complete than perhaps might be expected.” This is shown by the use of “kind of”, “sort of”, “I think”, “I guess” and the like. For example,

the sentence “A robin is a bird” shows certainty that “a robin” fulfils the requirement to be a member of “birds.” “A chicken is a bird,” on the other hand, will be seen as less true than the former sentence; therefore, it will be more appropriate to say “A chicken is a sort of bird.” (Examples are taken from Lakoff 1972).

Pappas (1989, p. 94) categorises hedges as one type of “qualifiers”, i.e., indicators of the level of approximation and speaker commitment to a proposition. Hedges are qualifiers which suggest approximation or uncertainty of the main assertions, for example, “probably”, “appear”, “partially”, or “a tendency to”, while “intensifiers” are those which point out the speaker is confident in the proposition, for example, “always”, “never”, or “obviously”.

Further, Prince et al. (1982) classify hedges into four types: (1) “rounders”, which show approximate ranges for quantitative information; (2) “adaptors”, which suggest the similarity of non-identical cases; (3) “plausibility shields”, when the speaker is not fully committed to the assertion or the assertion is not based on deductive logic but plausible reasons; and (4) “attribution shields”, when the speaker attributes the assertion to another person or object. For example,

- Rounder** : This package is *about* 10 kilograms
- Adaptor** : He was *sort of* tall
- Plausibility shield** : It *seems like* it is going to rain
- Attribution shield** : *According to his mother* he was good at sports.

Why People Hedge

From the listener’s view of the speaker’s competence, hedged statement may be interpreted as having a negative effect, because they fail to support their assertions. However, a number of studies suggest that hedging is necessary in several ways. First, by hedging speakers can avoid commitment to the assumptions they make (Brown & Levinson 1987, Prince 1982). Second, hedging helps indicate approximate ranges, where detailed accuracy is not necessary or overprecision is unexpected (Prince 1982, Pappas 1989). Third, hedging may help professionals have control over their clients. Pappas argues that “one way professionals indicate their level of expertise is the degree of uncertainty they convey ... (in order to) ... make their assertion indisputable (and) irrefutable” (pp. 101-3), because hedges, such as shields, can give “very high degrees of uncertainty or maximum protection against challenges.” (p.103)

At the other end of line, why do discourse analysts bother to study expression which are not certain or fail to give reliable information? Generally, it may be because

No concept, not even those of mathematics, is absolutely precise, and some of the most important for everyday use are extremely vague ... when anybody undertakes to say precisely ..., he will quickly find he outruns all logical warrant. (Piece (1956) as quoted in Schmidt, 1974, p. 617)

Specifically, it is probably because psychologists and linguistics philosophers have long realised that many concepts have vague boundaries and fuzzy edges, and as a result, many statements will very often be neither true nor false, but rather true or false to a certain extent, and true or false in a certain respect (Lakoff, 1972, p. 183). In psychology, the work of Heider (1971) shows that category membership, of a bird vegetable, for example, is rather perceived as a matter of degree than a clear-cut yes-or-no matter. In linguistics, Ross (1972) concludes that rules of grammar, grammatical

elements, categories, or constructions do not in fact simply apply or fail to apply, rather they apply to a certain degree.

Functions of Hedges

The most obvious function of hedges is as softeners, among others: to soften claims (Hatch, 1992), to soften complaints, requests and commands (Brown & Levinson, 1987), to soften performatives (Frazer, 1975, Lakoff, 1972), and to soften criticism (Drechsel, 1989). Examples of each softener are given below:

- Softened claim : The data **appear** to support the assumption of the
Softened complaint : Excuse me. **I think** I came here before her.
Softened request : I was **wondering if probably** you **could** bring me another cup
Softened command : Open that window, **will you?**
Softened performative : I **can** promise you that we will be there on time.
Softened criticism : **Well, personally, I think** it **would** be better **if** the table was placed there.

The second function is as cooperative devices in conversation, for example, to diminish face threatening acts (FTA) such as interrupting; to negotiate sensitive topics and encourage participation (Coates 1988); to strengthen or weaken statements (Brown & Levinson 1987). In particular, Hatch (1992) suggests that hedges can smooth a disagreement with a conversational partner. Finally, hedges can act like one of politeness strategies, such as in understating (Brown & Levinson 1987), and giving comment (Buikema & Roeters 1982).

Hedging users

Who uses hedges more? Or who uses hedges less? Because hedges are classified as "powerless" language (Erickson et al. 1978), and indicate uncertainty, people will assume that women will use hedges more than men. Also, physicians, scientists, academic people, and those holding authority, regardless of their sex, will be assumed to use hedges less than lay persons.

The first assumption is supported by some studies. Lakoff (1975) concludes that hedges are one characteristic of female communication behaviour. Buikema and Roeters' study (1982) reports that in male-female conversation women tend to use politeness strategies (including hedges) more often than men with a purpose to minimize the face-threatening acts. Coates (1988) also confirms that when women are talking among themselves, hedges are frequently used to respect the face needs of all participants.

The work of Wright and Hosman (1983) on legal communication, however, points out the unfortunate situation of female witnesses when they use hedges. They found that both male and female witnesses using hedges in their testimony were perceived as less attractive than those not using hedges. The female witnesses using a higher number of hedges particularly were perceived as less credible than the male witnesses in the same category.

Regarding the second assumption, little evidence supports it. In fact, Pappas' study (1989) on patient-physician discourse indicates a surprising situation where the professional used qualifiers more often than the patients. It is possibly because a

diagnosis is, to a degree, tentative. In addition, prince et al. (1982) reports that doctors produce more than one hedge every fifteen seconds when talking among themselves.

Concerning the use of hedges in the spoken and written language, hedges seem to appear more in the spoken discourse than the written one. Chafe and Danielwics (1987) indicate that academic lecturers use limited vocabulary, hedge frequently and are referentially inexplicit. Moreover, Drechsel (1989) confirms that hedged forms were found more in oral language, while written language there was a balance between modals and hedges.

Certainty versus Uncertainty

Hedging seems to suggest contradictory phenomena. On one side, speakers hedge because they are not certain of what they say, therefore, by doing so they do not have to take the responsibility of their statements, in case their assertions are not true, correct or right. Question may be raised about the speakers' competence, reliability, credibility, and willingness or sincerity to tell the truth. Hedged statements may also sound uninformative.

On the other side, statements which are not hedged will mostly seem too strong, too direct, or too blunt; and therefore, the claims may sound less true than the factual nature of the incidents, rude or like accusations. In many cases, in fact, the "uncertain" or "soft" claims are more appropriate, accurate or acceptable. For example, saying that

"Indonesians like rujak cingur"

may raise questions such as: Is it true?, Which Indonesians?, Do all Indonesians like it?, or even a remark like: Are you sure? I'm Indonesian but I don't like it. The claim can be made more accurate by softening the assertion with hedges like:

Most Indonesians like rujak cingur.

Most Indonesians seem to like rujak cingur *very much*

It *seems* that *quite many* Indonesians like rujak cingur.
and some others.

Hedges as softeners, conversational cooperative devices and politeness strategies are also necessary in working out a successful conversation, especially in maintaining the face-wants. If a speaker does not agree to his or her partner, he or she can soften the expression of disagreement by saying, for example, "You *could* be right, *but* ...", and still maintain the friendship.

Some studies suggest that professionals use hedges quite frequently, and sometimes more often than lay persons. The reasons is not that they are reliable or incompetent in making statements, but rather it is because they probably realise that there is no absolute in this world, and the circumstantial limitations enable them to make strong claims because the claim can not be one-hundred percent true or acceptable. Therefore, in research reports, journals, and science books, a great deal of hedges may be found, such as: *appear, sound seem, suggest; very likely/unlikely, highly likely; a tendency to* and the like. It was also suggested that professionals' hedged statements can give a positive impression about their expertise, because their assertions sound acceptable, and therefore become indisputable and irrefutable.

Implications to English Teaching in Indonesia

As it has been discussed above, hedging is indispensable not only in spoken language but also in written discourse. Most statements in Bahasa Indonesia sound too direct if they are transferred into English. Statements in most papers of university students were often found too direct and strong. The reason is perhaps not that they have simple understanding or want to simplify the subjects, but rather it is because they do not know that they need to soften their statement by hedging.

In learning vocabulary, among other things, learners need to learn the degree of the strength of words, that is, which words suggest strong, mild or weak claims. In learning the grammar, learners need to know for example, that Conditional Sentences are not only to express "unreal present event", but also to soften claims.

As for language skills, Skelton (1975) suggests what he calls "sensitising exercise" in which the students are asked to value the degree of certainty of the material they read and listen to. Concerning the productive skills, he further suggests a rewriting exercise in which the students rewrite what they have read using their own point of view.

Conclusion

In summary, hedging is very important in social life as well as in academic and professional life. Although it is used to express uncertainty, a hedged statement is mostly more accurate than a blunt generalisation. Yet, we need to know to what extent we hedge, because a speech or text using too many hedges may not interest the audience, and the information given may be uninformative.

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**Without hedging, the world is purely propositional,
a rigid (rather dull) place
where things either are the case or are not**

**With a hedging system, language is rendered more flexible
and the world more suitable**

(Skelton, 1988)

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